

Travel and trade in the Pennine Alps

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On a European scale, the Swiss Alps have often seemed to act as a barrier to long distance movements, and the natural routeways within the mountain blocks have been given attention merely for their strategic and large-scale significance. In fact these routeways also unite regions on a more local scale and form vital arteries for the passage of products, persons and ideas. And they generate their own cultures, provoke trade and ultimately create complementary zones. It is the aim of this article to examine the ways these functions have operated and interacted in history.

The Central Alps can be imagined as three parallel lateral blocks of mountains, from north to south: the Bernese Oberland, Pennine Alps and Graian Alps, separated by two lateral valleys: those of the Rhône in Valais and the Dora Baltea in Aosta. Important international routes follow the courses of these rivers and their parallel pattern is linked by two major passes through the Pennine Alps, the Great St Bernard (2472 m) in the west and the Simplon (2008 m) in the east. These passes monopolise traffic now, but in the past several minor international passes were also used as routeways through the



67 *Hospice on the Great St Bernard.* This and the next two photos: Swiss National Tourist Office



68 *Hospice on the Simplon*

Pennine Chain, including the Théodule and Monte Moro passes and the Col d'Hérens whose trade history has been the subject of two earlier articles (*A.J.* 75, and 76). If we forget the modern situation, therefore, we can envisage the Pennine Alps simply as a barrier, pierced in at the very least seven places. In reconstructing the historical character of the area we must also forget the present climatic conditions and visualise a situation where until the period of climatic cooling which began probably in the late sixteenth century, all the passes under consideration were deglaciated and where alpine pastures and the territories of villages met at the cols.

It was not until during the retreat from the Riss glaciation that colonising groups moved from the Swiss and Italian plains into the mountains. Mousterian remains have been found in the Jura and by Lake Lucerne in the Oberland, and reindeer herders existed through the Upper Paleolithic. This gradual ingress was augmented by the infiltration of Neolithic pastoralists and agriculturalists who left stone tombs and querns on both sides of the Pennine range. According to their accessibility we may imagine the possibility of all seven passes being used essentially as 'zones of transit'. By Roman times there were five tribes in the area. To the north, the Nantuates, Veragri, Seduni and Uberti lived as 'adventurers, shepherds and pirates' and to the south in Aosta were the Salassi.

Imperial administrators in Rome were not slow to realise the necessity of pacifying these tribes, since the area was one of extreme strategic significance, linking Italy and Gallia Cisalpina with Germania and Gallia Transalpina. In BC 57 Sergius Galba with twelve legions invaded and overwhelmed the marauding Aostan and Valaisian tribes, created Martigny (Octodurus) as

capital of the area, and bestowed on it the advantages of a market. So characteristically, it was the Romans who first thought of the two sides of the Pennine Alps as having a regional identity.

But the road network lay in nascent form until Augustus linked Octodurus southwards over the Great St Bernard to the town named after him (Augusta Praetoria now Aosta). He also engineered paved mule tracks over the Théodule and Simplon passes, similar in character, I suppose, to the kind of path on which one walks into the Himalaya from the roadheads nowadays. The choice of these three routes reflected their relative accessibility and their durable character reflected the scale of the Imperial vision. The St Bernard road was 8 to 16 ft wide, 6 ft thick and made of beds of broken stone and brushwood reinforced with stakes and raised to prevent it from becoming a series of stream beds in winter.

The reasons for constructing such routeways may have been primarily military and political, but once built they served commercial and ecclesiastical purposes and the taxes and tolls exacted from their users were absorbed into the fiscal system of the Empire. The rudimentary road network was a vital artery for the *cursus publicus* or mail service, and small protective garrisons were stationed at strategic points together with *mansiones*, modest shelters for Imperial merchants. Typically, the Romans implanted on the region not only their system of commerce but also suitable elements of their agriculture, in this case the cultivation of fruit and vines in orchards. The Pennine region conformed to the Roman policy of provincial independence and subservience: there was peace and trade for four centuries until the collapse, the deterioration of the route network and a period of renewed barbarian invasions.

First to come to both Valais and Aosta were the Alemans from the north, followed in AD 489 by the Burgundians who are said to have integrated peacefully. From 535–750 there succeeded the Franks from the north-west, the Lombards from the south and the controversial Saracen infiltration from the Maritime Alps. Under Charlemagne the road system was temporarily patched, passes were protected, and as a result pilgrims thronged, less molested, to Rome. Religious orders established hospices near the great passes to provide travellers with food and shelter. The hospice built in 1125 on the Great St Bernard was undeniably instrumental in swelling the trade between Lombardy and South Germany. Once the depredations of the invaders had ceased, Aosta slowly restored itself to become a walled garden city with drained paved roads and a market. Sion to the north had important ecclesiastical functions and was a centre for a substantial transit trade.

From Venice, Lombardy and Florence, routes led through the Dolomites and through the Pennine Alps to the fairs of Geneva, Lyons, Champagne and Flanders, to north Germany and to England. Fourteenth century toll charges reveal the type of commodity trafficked though we have little idea of the quantities involved:

Table 1 Toll charges in the Valais, fourteenth century

Charge	Article
12 deniers	French sheets, cloth of gold, silks, spices and for each horse
6 deniers	Fustian, wool, polished leather, pins and needles, haberdashery and armaments
2 deniers	Iron and all other metals

In spite of such taxes, the prosperity of the Valais at that time depended on the delicate balance of the relative cheapness and freedom of trade there compared with that of routes elsewhere. It is not surprising, considering the location of the Pennine Alps that such trans-European trade was focused through Valais and Aosta; what is interesting is that these two structurally similar areas abutting the Pennine Divide should generate a good deal of purely local trade, much of which involved passes now considered as unimportant. The Monte Moro and the Theodulpas were used as important mail routes between the Val d'Ossola, Aosta and Piedmont and the Valais. They and the Col de Collon were also used for a longstanding reciprocal trade between the warmer southern and cooler northern lateral valleys. Climatic variety resulted in closely interdependent economies. Grain, maize and rice, almonds and other fruit, cheese and red and white wine were sent from the Italian slopes in exchange for cattle, sheep (sent to pasture through the winter) leather goods, wool cloth and salt from the Valais.

At times in the early Middle Ages, the two sides of the Pennine chain were united both ecclesiastically (as the province of Tarentasia) and politically (under Savoy). When this happened and the area was recognised as an entity there was much intermigration.

Aostans varying from road labourers and carpenters to doctors and surgeons established themselves at Sion, and in the late thirteenth century, 50 per cent of the clergy at Sion were from south of the Divide. Aostan noblemen were granted land in the Valais and vice versa, and there is a series of well documented exchanges of peasants from the Saas and Visp valleys over the Monte Moro and the Theodulpas to the Val d'Anzasca, the Valle di Gressoney and the Valtournanche and vice versa. This practice under Godefroi and Jocelyn de Blandrate mixed language groups to a certain extent as is evinced by contemporary and subsequent cartographic confusion between French ('Praborgne'), German ('Zermatt') and Italian place names on both sides. The lasting effect, however, was to establish a community with a distinctly Germanic culture in the heads of most lateral valleys south of the Divide, which lasted until Mussolini's policy of Italianisation prior to the Second World War.

Not only were there permanent migrations but also a number of temporary ones. There was much local migration in the Middle Ages to the large fairs at Macugnaga and Piedimulera (lit: 'mule steps') in the Val d'Anzasca, and also

a great deal of seasonal migration amongst 'those who were lacking in bread' in Valais and Aosta who crossed Pennine and Oberland passes in winter in order to find employment in Berne and Basle and Southern Germany as pedlars (of traditionally ill-repute) as 'lumbermen and land clearers or even chimney sweeps'.

Finally priest-chroniclers emphasise the fact that until the seventeenth century, the inhabitants of the lateral valleys of Visp, Saas, Anniviers and Visperterminen had to worship in churches in the main Rhône valley, the famous example of which is the annual day's pilgrimage from Zermatt to Sion via the gorge of the Val d'Hérens and the deglaciated Col d'Hérens. In short the late Middle Ages marked a time of great mobility on a large and small scale.

It is difficult to determine whether the accompanying population expansion saw either much renewal of roads or creation of new ones. We know from contemporary accounts that tracks were very narrow, sometimes cut into rock and often bridging torrents in a spectacularly unsafe fashion (see typical comments made by Forbes about the plank bridge between Stalden and Saas¹). All

¹*Travels through the Alps of Savoy* (1900 edition) p.355.

69 *Tunnel near Gondo*
(Simplon Pass)



transport over the passes was by horse or mule not by cart or chariot; indeed mule trains are quoted as late as 1748 as being the major source of wealth to the communes in the Pennine Alps. Pigs, sheep, goats and cattle were regularly driven along these routes and there existed timed arrangements for passage in either direction along narrow sections, together with resting places on flat ground or ice where herds and flocks could pass. The ice also incidentally acted as a refrigerator for game. In the Middle Ages six *soustes* (combinations of hotels, resting places and warehouses) were built in the Rhône communes of the Valais, four in Aosta and four in the Val d'Ossola. At these points tolls were charged and loads checked for their weight (the maximum of which could be, exorbitantly by modern standards, 250 kg).

Authority over the roads was divided among local powers. The Bishop of Sion who had great temporal power and was nominally in charge of road maintenance in Valais gathered revenue from escort rights—the right of a commune to police convoys passing through. Tolls were exacted by communes, but not often distributed for their correct purpose which was the upkeep of roads, bridges, *soustes* and hospices. Most income accrued to the entrepreneurial sector for portage payments—the right of every commune to transport the commodities in transit.

The major routeways suffered much damage from avalanches, torrents and floods. A very great number of men (masons, carpenters and brushwood cutters) were detailed to repair roads and clear snow in winter. Apart from agriculture this must have been the dominant source of employment in the region.

Table 2 Men and chariots employed for road repairs in Rhône valley communes (1327–35)

Date	Men	Chariots
1327–31	966	254
1331	66	122
1332	595	146
1333	448	53
1334	158	98
1335	340	42

But local mountain roads provided even more ammunition for criticism: 'The ways are very offensive to Foote travellers. For they are pitched with very sharp and rough stones that will very much punish and grate a man's feet'. 'Nearly all the mountain paths are narrow and rough, and often hewn into the rock so thinly that beasts of burden can hardly use them'. . . 'In times of deep snow, even in the wider sections, travellers risk slipping, and the terrifying views downwards make travellers who fear vertigo place their hands in those of a worthy local guide.' 'Paths across snow are restricted to a beaten track on each side of which the snow is deep and dangerous'. Precautions taken were many and various. Parties often roped up when crossing glaciers, even when

paths, delineated by cattle dragging planks across fresh snow, were marked with posts. Paper and parchment protected the chest from biting winds and a black veil protected the eyes from glare. It was the custom for travellers, shepherds and hunters 'to bind firmly to the feet iron shoes like the shoes of horses fitted with sharp spikes so that they can secure their footsteps in the ice'. Of the various means of travel employed on such terrain perhaps the most enjoyable were 'felled branches of trees in particular fir trees' which were drawn uphill by oxen and left to the shepherd or merchant's own steering ability downwards on 'steep and almost precipitous slopes' . . . , obviously a prototype bobsleigh.

The picture of thriving long and short distance trade, of enterprising peasants and daring merchants was abruptly shattered by four events.

The seven passes of the Pennine Alps were corridors for the transmission of plague and pestilence. Many are the letters between bishops and noblemen of the Valais and their counterparts in Aosta endeavouring to halt the traditional local trade for the fear of the merchants' transporting the contagion. But to little avail. From the dates of those documents extant for the period 1565–1630 there were at least fourteen years of plague, and probably many more. The final plague which lasted from 1629–31 reduced the population on both sides of the mountains by more than a half, brought catastrophe to the agricultural economy and wrecked the system of trade. Recovery was impeded because of wars between Valais and Savoy also because European trade turned towards the oceans, contributing *inter alia* to the rise of the Netherlands and the ruin of the Lombard cities. Finally a marked climatic cooling had led to the accretion of glaciers on all the passes concerned. This cooling has been called the Little Ice Age and dated at maximum extent between 1625–40 and there is no reason to suppose that the Pennine Alps differed radically from this pattern. Certain it is that not only did it disrupt the physical passage of commodities over the cols, but also the change in climate affected both the cereal and pastoral parts of the Pennine economy.

The period was not entirely gloomy, however. In the seventeenth century Kaspar Stockalper of Brig initiated some improvements in the valley routes and raised tolls on all goods travelling via the Simplon except for exports from the Valais. More *soustes* were built, and a superintendent of weights was appointed at each.

In the eighteenth century traffic increased as part of a general increase in trade within Europe, and the cols were also used for military purposes in wars against Lombardy and Savoy. Even so wheeled traffic did not appear on the passes until as late as 1775. The construction of modern routes which hastened the decline of the minor passes dates from Napoleon who (as with the Romans), wishing to strengthen communications within his Empire built solid roads and bridges at gradients capable of allowing the haulage of heavy cannon. In May 1800 Bonaparte crossed the Great St Bernard with 40,000 men on his way to the battle of Marengo and by 1805 a route over the Simplon had been constructed. Since that time the rise in mountaineering, skiing, tourism and the development

of Swiss hydroelectric power resources have acted as incentives to improve communications in the less important lateral valleys. International trade over the major passes has increased to such a degree that a tunnel was built through the Great St Bernard in the 1950s and the width of the Simplon road has been doubled. The siphoning of traffic through these two routes has accentuated the disparity between major and minor passes, and reduced the regional identity of the Pennine Alps. But if the area is nowadays a zone of transit for vast numbers of people, the very fact that they are mostly channelled along a few routeways can make a small number of us rejoice that there is so much of great beauty, great age and great remoteness preserved or conserved for those who will make the effort on foot, as right through history.



70 *On the summit of the Simplon looking towards the Oberland.* Photo: E. C. Pyatt